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AUTHOR Scheffer, Ludo C. P.
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ABSTRACT

SHELCOM, an adult education project in homeless shelters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, investigated the effects of using computer technology on participants' writing and communication skills. The project consisted of 2-hour workshops, twice weekly, complemented by online support and instruction. Learners paired across the city worked on creating a publication through online communication with each other and their instructors. Collaboration occurred through file-sharing in a modem communication network established between the three shelters and the National Center on Adult Literacy. Computers were the overwhelming reason learners signed up for the project. All participants thought learning to use the computer could help them improve their writing. Being able to work on a composition, answer questions from a writing partner or project director, and write requests for help at any time of the day was considered invaluable. All participants stated they thought the computer had played an important role in changing the way they looked at their writing and writing skills. Using the computer saved time and was less frustrating because of the spelling and grammar checkers. Participation in SHELCOM helped learners to organize their thoughts more clearly and to articulate them in writing. Participants stated that learning to use the computer was the major reason for finishing the project. Retention of learners was over 75 percent. (YLB)

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SHELCOM

Going High Tech With the Homeless

By LUDO C. P. SCHEFFER

The use of computer technology has been advocated by many in the field of adult literacy, and to some is seen as the solution for improving the quality of adult basic education. However, there remain an equal number of skeptics. SHELCOM[1] is an adult education project in homeless shelters in Philadelphia that set out to investigate the effects of using computer technology on participants' writing and communication skills. The project consists of two-hour workshops, twice weekly, complemented by on-line support and instruction. Learners, who were paired up across the city, work on creating a publication through on-line communication with each other and their instructors. Collaboration occurs through file-sharing in a modem communication network established between the three shelters and NCAL. All participants live in three shelters for homeless families and women.

Creating a well-written composition is a difficult process, even for many graduate students and professionals. Research into writing development has shown that learners at various levels have problems putting together a coherent text. The main difficulty that people have is finding the language to express the knowledge that they have. This is further complicated by an overemphasis on the surface aspects of the written language (e.g., spelling and punctuation). The result is that many of us develop some level of writing anxiety. However, we have also learned strategies to cope with this anxiety and have not allowed it to prevent us from writing.

All participants thought that learning to use the computer could help them improve their writing, although their understanding of the scope of what constituted writing improvement was limited.

Writing anxiety among adult learners usually finds its origins in earlier formal schooling experiences, which stressed these surface aspects of the written language. The large majority of the participants in the SHELCOM project believed, therefore, that to improve writing skills, they had to improve their spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Adult literacy program participants quite often have not learned strategies to overcome their writing anxiety. This, coupled with their beliefs about writing, prevents them from engaging in any sustained writing activity. They even experience difficulty with minor writing activities, such as

LUDO C. P. SCHEFFER is an NCAL Literacy Fellow.

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writing a letter to their children's school, since they are afraid of making mistakes and looking "dumb." Writing by participants was also seen as a chore and a skill many thought they did not possess.

Computers, however, were of great interest and were the overwhelming reason that these learners signed up for the project. They associated computers with returning to mainstream society and obtaining employment that would sustain them and their families. Parents

Being able to work on a composition, answer questions from a writing partner or project director, and write requests for help at any time of the day was considered invaluable.

also wanted to be able to understand what their children were talking about and be able, if possible, to help them. All participants were keenly aware that computer technology was used in almost every facet of contemporary daily life, from movie-theater tickets to VCR to video games to ATM machines to "helping making information more easily accessible." All participants thought that learning to use the computer could help them improve their writing, although their understanding of the scope of what constituted writing improvement was limited. The reasons most often given for computers improving writing were that computers would help improve their spelling and make work look neater (surface features of a composition).

Over a 12-week period of the project, eleven participants connected 827 times to the SHELCOM network. Connections were logged by the computer server for time and duration. Connections to the network took place at various times of the day and on all days of the week. One participant, for example, connected to the network on the Fourth of July, while another participant connected in the middle of the night. Being able to work on a composition, answer questions from a writing partner or project director, and write requests for help at any time of the day was considered invaluable. Participants felt that they could work and be most productive when they felt like it, and not just at the regulated, twice-a-week times of the workshops. File-sharing was used to communicate about their compositions, but participants also used file-sharing as an e-mail system, by sending documents back and forth with the "SAVE-AS" command. Appointments to meet each other, requests for telephone numbers, and messages of support and affirmation were sent between writing partners. The learners created a community of writers who discussed their life situations and the progress they were making in their return to society as well as the content and word usage of the compositions they were working on.

All participants stated that they thought the computer had played an important role in changing the way they looked at their writing and writing skills. Saving time was one of the most important effects the computer had on the participants' writing process. One participant said, "It saved so much time with revision of drafts (CUT, COPY, PASTE). Time-saver, no shattered paper work, no tired wrist, no lost ideas."

Most important to the participants, the computer made writing less frustrating and more fun.

Another participant stated, "It made it a lot easier to write, you could make changes easily." Most important to the participants, the computer made writing less frustrating and more fun. One participant put it even more forcefully, "With the computer I can put out thoughts as I get these without any form or status, then later when all thoughts [on my topic] are revealed, I can cut and paste them in the proper form." Using the computer was even considered a time-saver by those who had poor or no typing skills. One of the participants stated, "I never typed before, now I can type some." She wrote an elaborate 10-page story on data processing.

Using computers in a writing project, in which learning to write is tied into learning to understand and operate a computer, can facilitate the development of metacognitive skills.

For all the participants, writing on the computer was also less frustrating because the computer had a spelling checker and a grammar checker installed. A participant put it best when she said, "With the computer, nobody will know what mistakes you made because it checks the spelling all for you before you print it out and this way you learn also how some words are spelled." Hence, working on the computer not only helped correct spelling, but it also resulted in a clean product about which the participants felt a sense of accomplishment.

Being able to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's activities are important skills for adults to possess for full participation in today's society and in their children's lives. Adult learners seem to have poorly developed metacognitive skills as evidenced in their writing. Using computers in a writing project, in which learning to write is tied into learning to understand and operate a computer, can facilitate the development of metacognitive skills. Participation in SHELCOM helped learners to organize their thoughts more clearly and to articulate them in writing. Having a long-distance writing partner within a structured writing environment facilitated a process of knowledge-transformation and a movement from writer-based prose to reader-based prose. The Macintosh computer environment further aided the learning process because of its ease of use. Computers are a strong attraction for participation and retention in adult

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literacy programs. In the SHELCOM project, participants stated that learning to use the computer, as part of an integrated curriculum, was the major reason for finishing the project.

> *Computers are a strong attraction for participation and retention in adult literacy programs.*

Retention of learners in SHELCOM was over 75%. At the same time, using computers in adult literacy programs in homeless shelters requires a total rethinking of teaching methods, learning strategies, and the structuring of programs.

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[1] SHELCOM is a collaborative project of NCAL and Philadelphia's Mayor's Commission on Literacy.

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